

The international arena is increasingly heading towards a multipolar model in which US hegemony is challenged by the EU and China.

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China has emerged as a growing power in the international arena. [Hanne Cuyckens](#) assesses the EU's relationship with the country and the potential for both actors to challenge the United States as the dominant global power. While China and the EU have both advocated a multipolar model, in which US hegemony is balanced by other powers, the two actors have very different conceptions of how this model should be realised.



We are reminded every day of the extent to which the post-Cold War world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent. In such a globalised world it is only logical that a certain number of problems can only be effectively addressed if done collectively. As the European Security Strategy (ESS) stated so rightfully "No single country is able to tackle today's complex problems on its own". In this respect, a certain number of rising actors are trying to find their place in an international order dominated by the United States. Over recent decades, the emergence of the EU as an external actor and the rise of the People's Republic of China, have greatly influenced world politics. These actors have the potential, by virtue of their size, economic weight and strategic importance, to become important actors on the international scene. They share the view that a more balanced multipolar system would provide for a more secure and stable world, even if their exact understanding of this multilateralism is not the same.

Both the EU and China recognise the need for global problems to be addressed by all global actors. At the same time, they are also both trying to find their place in a globalised world dominated by the US. One of the main priorities for the EU in its relationship with China is to integrate it into the international scene and encourage it to become a responsible global actor, contributing to the 'effective multilateralism' that is so important for the EU. When the [EU policy Paper](#) produced by China in 2003 is analysed, it seems that the promotion of multilateralism is also an important element for China. However while they might both agree on the importance of a balanced international system with multiple poles of power, they do not share exactly the same view on how this multilateralism should be realised.

EU multilateralism can best be summarised as placing importance on effective international (and regional) organisations, and international law. China, in contrast, believes more in multiplying the number of poles of power capable of containing the most powerful states, than it does in the development of an effective international governance framework. From China's perspective, international institutions can constitute one of these poles, but they should not constitute the pivotal point of the more balanced international order. Big powers, such as itself, should also play an important role in the balancing process and, unsurprisingly, the



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Chinese vision of the world order emphasises sovereignty and non-interference in international affairs.

How does the US fit into this picture? Even though both China and the US are crucial trade partners for the EU, when prompted to choose between putting its relationship with China or the US at risk, the EU is ultimately more inclined to prioritise the transatlantic one. This was clearly illustrated by the debate surrounding the lifting of the EU's [arms embargo](#) against China (2003-2005), where in the end the EU gave in to US pressure and decided to maintain the embargo. If the debate were to take place again, however, it is not certain that the outcome would still be the same. Indeed, some more recent events have shown that China's role on the international scene is growing.

The first element that would provide support for this idea is the role China has played in the financial crisis which broke out in September 2008. While the US was struggling, China confirmed its status as a crucial economic partner as it was able to help the rest of the world cope by lending money, including to the US. This has without any doubt affected the balance of power between both countries and after having successfully passed through the financial crisis, China became more assertive on the international scene. This was for example demonstrated by the role it played in subsequent climate change negotiations. Whereas China affirmed its international player status during the Copenhagen Climate change conference, the EU, on the other hand, failed to play any role at all, which is particularly surprising since climate policy is a field where the EU has traditionally played an important role on the international scene. Accordingly, whilst China has been rising on the international stage, the EU has been losing ground. The EU's recent internal problems with regard to the Eurozone certainly did not help in asserting its place on the international scene.

The way in which China is increasingly affirming itself in the global arena should serve as a wake-up call to both the US and the EU. It is unlikely that the US will lose its place as the most important global power; however it will have to monitor the rise of China (and possibly also that of the other BRIC countries). The EU on the other hand has to become a more coherent external actor if it wants to continue playing a real role in world politics. With the entry into force of the Lisbon treaty, the rules of the game are clearer, however this is not enough: there needs to be a real political will within the member states to effectively establish a more coherent external policy and let the EU play a major role in external relations.

The world order seems to be shifting towards more multipolarity, characterised by the existence of different poles of power. These poles nevertheless do not all have the same power. For now, the US remains the most important pole. But it is unsure whether this will remain the case. Different potential future scenarios have been advanced. Some have suggested the emergence of a new type of bipolar world composed of the US and China, while others visualise a 'triumvirate' composed of the previous two actors and the EU, or a wider model incorporating a major role for China and the other BRIC Countries. It is in any case clear that the EU has to continue proving itself as a stable and serious actor if it wants to stay in the game.

For a longer discussion of the topic, see [this article](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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